

Jewish Life in Aruba

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The Jewish community on Aruba has been carefully examined by a member of the Aruba Research Center for both anthropological and sociological data, and this work was probably as objective as possible since the researcher was not a member of any Jewish community. She would therefore not be biased as far as investigating and reporting all aspects of Jewish life on the island. However, I believe that valid research can also be done by another Jew, and possibly more insight into the most "Arubean" traits of the local group can be gleaned because there is a certain amount of common ground between field worker and informant, and divergence between the two might be attributable to specific causes in the local environment. After examining Jewish life in Aruba, I hope to be able to draw some useful conclusions about the relationship of this small community to the rest of the island, and perhaps find some truly Arubean characteristics.

The most striking aspect of the Jewish population, which is only about thirty families, is its tremendous financial interest in the island. This is obvious just walking down Nassaustraat and observing the names of some of the stores and their owners. Dutch names are comparatively rare, while names like Groder, Fuchs, Gelbstein, and so on are common. Even the Maduros, the great banking family on both Aruba and Curacao, are Jewish. Offhand, one would simply explain this phenomenon by the traditional Jewish role of

financier and merchant. However, *historical facts* give a much more precise and logical explanation. Before *Lago* established itself on the island, there was literally nothing there; Oranjestad did not have to provide a commercial center for the island because Arubians were self-supporting. When the refinery came though, the imported labor that came with it required commercial development of the island. Not long after Lago's establishment on Aruba, political pressures began to mount in Europe, and the Jewish emigration increased sharply. Many of these Jews came to the New World, and Aruba was among their destinations. It should be noted however, that not all the presently-successful Aruban Jews arrived in this wave of immigration. The Maduros are Sephardic or Spanish Jews, and came much earlier than the Eastern Europeans, the Ashkenazi. When any of the Jews arrived though, they were far from what they are today. It is interesting here to note how one member of the Research Center described these people when asked about them in reference to this paper: "rich and stingy merchants from the old country". Aruban Jews did not come to the island as such, and if this description is applicable today, then they worked hard to earn it. They were not for the most part merchants in Europe for two basic reasons. First, many came from small towns rather than cities, where there were few great merchants, and second, they were too young to have established themselves at all. A typical story which illustrates just how far one member of the community has progressed was related by an informant about Adolf Groder, owner of the Panama Store in San Nicolas.

When Mr. Groder arrived from Europe *he had little more than* the clothing he wore, and earned his living as a *peddler*, carrying any small item he could sell in a pack on his back and going from door to door. From these beginnings he has established a fairly large dry goods store, and is now among the most successful merchants. His children received advanced education outside Aruba, his daughter having married and settled in the United States, and his son is soon to take a computer course so that he will be able to apply computer technology to the running of the elder Mr. Groder's business. Mr. Groder himself is an active member of the Esso Club, using the facilities every day for his morning swim at Rogers Beach before opening his store. He is just one example of how the Jews have established themselves as members of the merchant community.

The various prejudices against Dutch, Chinese, Black, American, etc. can be easily observed after a month or two on the island, and can be explained comparatively easily. Attitudes regarding the Arubean Jews are perhaps a little different, and should be examined further.

There are several factors which are crucial to understanding why the Jewish community is distinct from the rest of the Arubean population. Probably the most important is that collectively they control most of the money on the island, and in most cases, this is reason enough for a people to be looked upon as different from the common folk. Along with the actuality of fiscal power, there is also the stereotyped image of the stingy, money-hungry Jew persisting here as it

seems to throughout much of the world. This was demonstrated unquestionably within our first few weeks on the island by one informant who was just about the most typical Arubean of any I came into contact with. Phillip da Sousa, the informant, had brought Albert Walfenzau to the Research Center, and we were having an informal conversation. Albert is from one of the wealthier Jewish families, and because he and Phillip are very close friends, there was a great deal of good-natured teasing going on between the two of them. Interestingly enough, Phillip kept on referring to Albert as the "stingy Jew", and he would explain to me that Jews were only interested in making money, and trying to get something for nothing. He referred several times to the "Jewish race", and this racial obsession with money. No ill will was meant by these comments, and in fact this is precisely why they seem to represent my informant's true feelings; he made these statements when he was perfectly at ease, and had no reason to hide anything. The fact that he didn't know that his interviewer was Jewish also added to the naturalness of the situation, because later on, when Albert (the Jewish boy) asked me if I was Jewish, and I answered yes, Phillip became a bit more reserved. Presumably he felt that he could joke with Albert about his Jewish character because he knew him well, but he could not take such liberties with me because we had only met recently. Regardless of this, the fact remains that Phillip thought of Albert as representative of the "Jewish race" because of his interest in financial affairs and keen business knowledge. In an interview with another informant, Mrs. Maria Reyes,

Albert Walfenzau happened to be the topic of *conversation*, and his business activities were brought up. Again, to clarify the reason for Albert's successful ventures, it was explained to me that he was a Jew, and from this knowledge I would understand why he had done so well. No one took into account that Albert had gone to school in Europe for business administration and management, and that he had trained himself in handling money. It seemed instead that being born Jewish bestowed upon him a mind for business. What none of the Arubians interviewed ever realized however, was that Mike Groder, the son of Adolf Groder of the Panama Store, had been sent to school to learn business administration, but simply had no head for business, and is not interested in it in any way, as expressed by Mr. Groder and Mr. Walfenzau. The point is, the image of the Jew as money-oriented is well established in the Aruban mind, and is a major distinguishing factor of the Jewish community.

Aruban Jews not only have more money than most of the island's inhabitants, they often have more education. This is because the process of being educated fulfills several roles for Jewish youth. First, it maintains the old tradition of learning, which is basic to European Jewish life, in which a scholar is the most respected personage. Then, since the second generation Aruban Jew probably has a well-established business he will inherit from his parents, he must either a) learn how to run the business along modern, highly competitive lines, or b) learn how to invest the money his father will give him if he doesn't go into the business.

There is yet a more practical reason *for furthering one's* education; going on in school means leaving Aruba and usually continuing in the United States. In the U.S. there is a large Jewish population, so going to school there means finding a Jewish mate. This is very important among most Arubean Jews not only because of the standard practice of endogamy within the Jewish people, but because of their small numbers in the community. They are very aware of the fact that they are a limited group, and marrying outside the group would undermine it entirely. It is notable that even though young people marry outside of Aruba and often settle in the U.S., it is quite acceptable, as long as they marry another Jew. One member of the community who was interviewed is presently engaged to a non-Jewish girl from the U.S., but this informant interestingly enough is not on speaking terms with almost all the rest of the island's Jewish population, and his ties to the synagogue are all but non-existent.

The synagogue is an important part of Jewish life in Aruba, because it is the focus of the group identity. The religious services themselves conform strictly to the traditional readings, but there are certain characteristics in the observances which appear to be distinct adaptations of the Arubean community. The entire setup of the Friday night service is an odd mixture of Orthodox and Reform, two divisions within Judaism, the former observing all the old rabbinical laws, while the latter is a "modernized" version of the religion. It appears that since most of the members of the congregation who attend regularly are European in

origin, their presence would *account for the Orthodox* aspects of observance, including wearing of yarmulkas and *prayers* sung in Hebrew only. Almost all European Jewry in the past was Orthodox, thus explaining carryovers. However, many things about the observance of the Sabbath were certainly "reformed", including men and women sitting together during services, driving to and from the synagogue, and the fact that Sabbath services are held on Friday night only, not Saturday morning as well. Saturday is certainly not set aside as a day of rest, since the Jewish-owned shops in San Nicolas and Oranjestad are all open for business. It seems though that local Arubean conditions give some logical explanations for the incongruities between Reform and Orthodox practices. Driving to and from synagogue is necessary because most of the congregation lives some distance away, and it would simply be too far to walk at night. Although driving is usually prohibited on the Sabbath, it is reasoned that it is more important to drive in order to get to the synagogue to pray than not to go at all. As far as opening stores on Saturday, much of the trade on Nassaustraats is with tourists who arrive on the weekly cruise ships, and it would be very difficult if so many stores in town were closed to the tourist trade on Saturday as well as Sunday. These explanations might apply to two aspects of Reform Judaism which appear as part of Sabbath observance. However, I discovered no local condition which would explain why both men and women sit together during services. The separation of sexes is carefully observed in all Orthodox temples, and the fact that the service is Orthodox

in some ways but not this is *peculiar*.

After the Friday religious service the congregation gathers outside the main room of the synagogue for kiddish, sharing of wine. This is the time when everyone catches up on local gossip with everyone else, and relaxes for an hour or so before returning home. This custom is standard after services, but it seems to me to be especially important on Aruba because it allows members of the Jewish community to keep up with one another each week. Their keeping track of one another binds them together a little more.

When several members of the Research Center showed up at Friday night services, the reaction of the congregation was a warm welcome, and the apparent pleasure of the local Jewry increased when they learned that some members of the group were Jewish. One man didn't want to be told which students were Jewish -- he wanted to guess who was who because he was sure he could tell who the Jews were. He guessed two out of three correctly. On all occasions I encountered, when an Arubean Jew learned that this interviewer was Jewish, the reaction was one of immense warmth and the desire to take me in as a long-lost family member. There is definitely a kinship felt by Arubean Jews toward other Jews from other parts of the world. Although this feeling exists to a certain extent among all Jews, the expression of it is much more intense among Arubeans than, say, New Yorkers. The explanation for this may simply be that a New York Jew is one of millions, while an Arubean Jew is one of a handful, and meeting a stranger in Aruba who is also Jewish is a relatively

rare event. In all cases, even more *hospitality than was at* first offered was extended when an Aruban Jew *learned* that this student was Jewish. There were standing invitations from at least three informants for dinner at any time. One very pleasant afternoon was spent with "Tanta Martha", the proprietress of the Uncle Louis Store in San Nicolas. Having arrived at the store just before 12 o'clock, Tanta Martha invited me and the two students with me for lunch at her house above the store. We were to join her three employees and her for a birthday lunch she had prepared for one of the two girls who work for her. This occasion not only illustrated her desire to take care of Jewish girls far from home (which was what she told us plainly she was doing), but gave us a chance to see and "feel" a Jewish home on the island. This experience was one of my most memorable on the island, because Tanta Martha's home was so unmistakably Jewish. To a purely objective observer the house would have been a simple, well-kept apartment. However, to someone who has spent any time in Jewish homes in Boro Park, the most Jewish section of Brooklyn, perhaps to most Jewish part of New York, the apartment would seem to have been lifted up whole and transplanted to the Caribbean from there. The most distinctive feature of the Jewish home in Boro Park is the smell. It is unlike any other smell I can think of -- a combination of rich foods cooking for long hours, kitchen carefully scrubbed, furniture just polished, floors just washed -- all together forming a homey, warm, inviting atmosphere which says "This is a Jewish home." Perhaps this is a very ethnocentric

description, but it is the only *way to convey the feelings* aroused by this characteristic smell. What amazed *me so* much was that the minute I walked into Tanta Martha's house, the smell struck me, and it was exactly the same as the smell I had known from earliest childhood in Brooklyn.

Tanta Martha was very aware of being Jewish and was anxious to show her Hebrew books and serve Israeli wine to her guests, so it surprised me that she did not maintain a kosher home, as I learned when she served us a special crabmeat salad she had prepared. Crabmeat is not a kosher food, so observation was enough in this instance to confirm that her home was not kept kosher. However, the failure to observe dietary laws in no way diminished this woman's "Jewishness". In the same way, local quirks in religious observances in no way make the Arubean Jews less Jewish. On the contrary, all the peculiarities of this small community identified them as a unit distinct from the rest of the island's population, and in bringing them together, emphasized the underlying Jewish identity they shared. This identity is not the same as the preconceived image I had of Jews of my acquaintance. Rather, it is an Arubean identity, shaped by the island's conditions, and adapted so that the Jews can function successfully as Arubeans. The three Black Arubeans who work in the Uncle Louis Store are, in her own words, "like family" to Tanta Martha, and she says that when she is too old to run her business it will go to Johnny, one of the employees. It makes no difference that he is not Jewish. They work together as Arubeans,

regardless of this woman's strong *associations with* other Jews. By incorporating vital elements of Arubean *life* into their own, new traditions make Arubean Jews truly Arubean. Yet the "universal" Jewish elements are still there in easily recognizable traits, and links them unquestionably with Jews in other parts of the world.

In examining the Jews in Aruba, I have tried to make observations which could not have been made by a totally objective person. The elements I looked at were seen from a standpoint of directed observation, comparing them to a known community with the same basis, rather than purely describing the group. Making this type of comparison has helped clarify the Arubean in Arubean Jewish life.

Informants

Pim Bierman, about 50 years old, physician, Lago Hospital

Henry Boye, 22, employee at Lago Refinery

Phillip da Sousa, 20, mechanic at Lago Refinery

Adolf Groder, late 50's, owner of Panama Store

Michael Mendes, 23, welder at Lago Refinery

Maria Reyes, about 40, head nurse at Lago Hospital

Gime Viera, 20, diver for Esso

Albert Walfenzau, 24, entrepreneur

Martha Weitzberg, late 50's, owner of Uncle Louis Store